

MP3 PLAYERS

INTRODUCTION

Commuting in the winter isn't much fun. Buses break down, trains are halted by leaves, snow and trackside fires, and the Tube is packed with people wearing enormous coats.

Worse still, every method of transport seems to be populated by annoying children playing loud music on their mobile phones. There are two ways to avoid being driven insane: buy your own noisy phone and drown them out (see our mobile phone Labs test on page 115) or get some headphones and listen to your own music instead.

Fortunately, there has never been such a wide choice of portable music players. Whether you want a gadget that can hold a couple of albums or one that can carry your entire music collection, you'll be able to find one that sounds great, costs very little and runs for days on a single battery charge. This month we've tested 16 of the latest MP3 players, so we'll help you find the perfect player for your pocket.

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WIRED FOR SOUND

With so much choice available, it can be hard to know which MP3 player is best for you. Our round-up of 16 models from just £22 is sure to get you dancing in the street

Choosing an... MP3 Player

Before you can choose your ideal MP3 player, you need to understand what makes the various players different. Storage space, battery life and sound quality all vary between players, and not every product on the market has advanced features such as photo display or video playback.

STORAGE BEATER

The first thing to consider is how much storage space you'll need on your MP3 player. Every device in this test has at least 1GB of storage, which is enough for roughly 250 songs. That's plenty if you own only a few albums, or if you connect your player to your computer every few days to copy new tracks. If you want to carry more music with you, you'll need a player with a higher capacity.

Players with a capacity of up to 8GB typically use flash memory for storage. This has no moving parts, so it's robust and shouldn't be affected by everyday vibrations or knocks. Because of this, a flash memory player is a good choice if you plan to listen to music while running or doing other sports. Large amounts of flash memory are expensive, though, so higher-capacity players use a small hard disk to store data.

Hard disk players typically have a much lower cost per gigabyte, so they're ideal if you want to carry a large collection of music files or store several films to watch on the move. Hard disks contain fragile moving parts, though, so dropping them could prove disastrous. Similarly, vibrations from exercise can cause skipping or other problems during playback.

FILE CABINET

Storing CD-quality music requires about 10MB of storage space for every minute of a song, so a typical track might use around 40MB of storage space. Compressing music into an MP3 or WMA file makes each file around 10 times smaller, without a significant reduction in sound quality. If you've already created a library of music in MP3, WMA or AAC format you'll need to find a player that can play that type of file. The table on page 90 shows the file types supported by each player.

If you've already bought music online, you need to buy a player that works with your chosen store. Music purchased from Apple's iTunes store will play on Apple iPod players only. Similarly, protected files from the SonyConnect online store will play only on Sony players that support Connect.



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Most other online stores sell WMA DRM files. These will play on music players with the Plays For Sure logo. Depending on the store, you may also be able to download an unlimited amount of music while you continue to pay a monthly subscription. If you want to transfer subscription content to your player, be sure you have the correct package (such as Napster To Go) and look for the word 'subscription' in the Plays For Sure logo. Our table on page 90 lists the protected music compatibilities of each player.

TRANSFER REQUEST

It's easy to get music on to most players. With a Sony player or Apple iPod you use the manufacturer's own software, although if you buy an iPod Shuffle or Nano you'll have to download iTunes before you can get started. An increasing number of other players use Microsoft's Media Transfer Protocol (MTP). If your player supports MTP you can copy music to it using Windows Media Player or Windows Explorer. Some players function as a removable storage device, so you can simply copy folders of music across using Windows.

Although most of the players in this test focus on music, some can also play video files. Most support a limited range of files or even just one file type, but include software that can re-encode other video files into the correct format. Creative's Zen Vision: M is unusual in that it can play a wide variety of video files without help from PC software.

BATTERIES INCLUDED

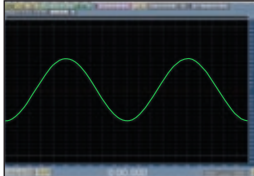
Standard AA or AAA batteries power two of the players in this test, but the others include their own rechargeable battery. There's no point in having a great MP3 player if it can't run for more than a few hours, so we recommend a minimum battery life of 10 hours. Fortunately, this is an area where MP3 players continue to improve. In our last MP3 player Labs test, in Shopper June 2006, the 16 players averaged 13 hours and 51 minutes on a charge. In this test, the average was an impressive 17 hours and 36 minutes, with seven players lasting more than 20 hours.

Finally, it's important to consider sound quality. None of the players tested here suffered from noticeable hiss, and none of them distorts at a comfortable listening volume at their default equalisation setting. Annoyingly, though, several players distort sound when you use an equaliser preset that boosts bass frequencies. In addition, many come with lacklustre headphones that lack clearly defined sound or can't produce much bass. We've given each player's headphones a separate rating in the summary of each review and in the table on page 88. You should consider replacing any that don't score at least three stars.

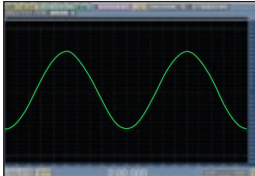
Distortion racket

Sound quality compared

Archos 104



Apple iPod 80GB



You might expect all MP3 players to sound the same, but even digital music players can vary in their sound quality. The four graphs on the left show the sound output recorded directly from two MP3 players when playing a 50Hz test tone. With flat equalisation, both players produce a smooth, regular sine wave (top) nearly identical to the original WAV file. Boosting the bass level on the Archos 104 (left) produces a more powerful sine wave with the same frequency, which is ideal. However, the iPod's Bass Boost preset (right) produces distortion that is clearly visible here.

SWEEX Pretty Pink 1GB

★★★★★

£22 inc VAT

This basic MP3 player from Sweex is one of the most affordable we've reviewed. With 1GB of flash memory it has as much storage space as some players that cost four times as much. In fact, it barely costs more than a 1GB USB flash drive. It isn't particularly small, but it feels robust, with buttons that feel as if they'd stand up to a few years of use.

The Pretty Pink is the same colour as a piggy bank. Its styling is a matter of taste, but we can't imagine that anyone will find its headphones attractive. They're attached via a silvery cable that looks gaudy and cheap. Surprisingly, they sound OK, with a clear mid-range sound. We weren't too impressed by the player's battery life, however. It ran for less than seven-and-a-half hours, which is the shortest we've measured using a Duracell AAA battery.

Although the Pretty Pink's buttons feel durable, they control a menu system that can be hard to fathom. We couldn't work out how to display a list of the player's contents, so we had to navigate by simply skipping tracks. Pushing the volume rocker to the right turns down the volume, which is extremely unusual.

VERDICT

The Pretty Pink isn't very easy to use and transferring music to it is slow, but it's cheap to buy and feels built to last. If you want to buy an MP3 player for a young child and don't want to worry if they break it, this is very good value.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Incredibly affordable
- ✓ Sounds decent, feels robust
- ✗ Disappointing battery life

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity,
USB interface
PART CODE MP024
SUPPLIER www.misco.co.uk
DETAILS www.sweex.com
HEADPHONES ★★



APPLE iPod Shuffle

★★★★★

£55 inc VAT



It's hard to imagine exactly how small

Apple's iPod Shuffle is until you take it out of the box. The player's white plastic control ring is little bigger than a Polo mint, and the whole device is roughly the size of the iPod Nano's screen.

The Shuffle is beautifully designed. It has a single port, which is used to connect headphones or for plugging into the supplied data dock. This is set at the back of the player, forming the hinge of a large metal clip. Though the hinge looks thin, it feels very strong and grips clothing securely. The Shuffle is so light that it's easy to forget you're wearing it.

This is the only player in this test without a screen, so it has a basic control system. You can skip tracks or scan forwards and backwards, and choose between repeat and shuffle playback. Hold mode is set and released by pressing the play/pause button for three seconds. Having no screen didn't seem a big problem with the older Shuffle players, but with 250 songs stored on this 1GB player it feels more limiting.

Though the 80GB iPod and the Nano both have redesigned headphones, the Shuffle comes with the ones familiar from older iPods. The player has no custom equaliser, but it sounds more bassy than other iPods and doesn't distort.

VERDICT

The new Shuffle looks amazing, has a great battery life and sounds better than the other iPods. If you can live without a screen and don't mind using iTunes, it's a lovely MP3 player.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Great design, decent sound
- ✓ Good battery life
- ✗ No display, basic controls

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity,
USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE MA564ZT/A
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.apple.com
HEADPHONES ★★★



NETAC Mustik A200 1GB

★★★★★

£70 inc VAT

Small radio transmitters that broadcast the music from your MP3 player so that you can listen to it on your car radio have been available for some time. Netac's Mustik A200 is the first MP3 player we've seen that has one built in. By the time you read this transmitters such as the Netac with the CE mark will be legal; see *What's New: Audio* on page 34 for more details.

The A200 is a neat, metal-cased player with a large screen that can display photos and films. It has very wide viewing angles but looks a bit grainy. The menu system needs improvement. It couldn't display Björk's name correctly, and graphics illustrating various items were out of step with the descriptive text. We also found the controls a little fiddly.

The A200 comes with an in-car cable, which lets you power and charge it from a cigarette lighter. This may be very useful, particularly as the player's battery isn't very good. With the FM transmitter enabled, it lasted only four hours and 52 minutes in our test. It couldn't manage too much longer through the headphones, and these have a slightly harsh mid-range that makes them tiring to listen to for long periods.

VERDICT

Integrating an FM transmitter into an MP3 player is a great idea, and there is a lot to like about the inexpensive A200. Its headphones and battery both need improvements, though. It's only good for in-car use, and even then its menus will be a pain.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Integrates with a car radio
- ✓ Affordable
- ✗ Poor battery life, tricky controls

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity,
USB Hi-Speed interface
SUPPLIER www.weast.co.uk
DETAILS www.netac.com
HEADPHONES ★★



IRIVER T10 1GB

★★★★★

£70 inc VAT

Iriver's T10 is a fairly basic player for the price. It has a colour screen, though this is too small to display photos, and no radio. Fortunately, it's one of the best-sounding players here. It's supplied with a pair of Sennheiser MX400 headphones. These won't block out external sounds, but they sound clear and detailed. They can also deliver strong, precise bass if you increase the levels using the player's equaliser.

The T10 is quite large for a flash-based player, particularly when compared to the miniscule iPod Shuffle. Like the Shuffle, though, it has a strong integrated clip. Though it doesn't have a rechargeable battery, it has room for an AA cell. A Duracell Ultra M3 battery powered it for nearly 32 hours, which is narrowly the longest in this test.

The T10 identifies itself to Windows as an MTP player, allowing you to synchronise music easily using Windows Media Player, but songs are listed by their folder structure in the player's database. You can't browse by artist or genre, so you'll get the best results if you organise your music into manageable directories before transferring it.

As with many players here, some of the T10's buttons perform two functions depending on how long they're held. Once you've mastered this, it's an easy player to use.

VERDICT

The T10 sounds great and has a good battery life. It's a little expensive for a 1GB player, but it comes with good headphones that won't need upgrading. This makes it good value.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Great sound and headphones
- ✓ Impressive battery life
- ✗ A bit bulky, tricky controls

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE 3T107A-EUOYX1
SUPPLIER www.amp3.co.uk
DETAILS www.iriver.com
HEADPHONES ★★★★★



SAMSUNG YP-Z5 2GB

★★★★

£80 inc VAT

Samsung's YP-Z5 is the only 2GB player in this test. At 3.9p per megabyte, it gives you a reasonable amount of storage for the price. It's about the same size as the original iPod Nano, but the chrome trim running around its edge makes it look like a smart mobile phone.

The Z5 has a bright screen that can display photos but not video files. It's quite big, but its low resolution makes images look a bit blocky. The player's menus are easy to understand and look great. Each page zooms into or out of the screen as you navigate up and down menu levels.

Unfortunately, selecting items from the menu lists is tiresome. The Z5 has a square rocker switch with four options that are easy enough to press. This surrounds a central selection button that also has touch-sensitive controls for scrolling up and down. This is infuriatingly insensitive, and often reacts slowly to commands. The player can catch you by surprise when it suddenly begins scrolling rapidly through a list, so it's easy to miss the song you wanted, and making small adjustments is tricky.

The Z5's Samsung headphones produce precise treble, but vocals in some music sounded harsh. The player sounded far better through our own headphones. At more than 26 hours, this was one of many MP3 players in this test with an excellent battery life.

VERDICT

It's good value and has a great battery, but the Z5's irritating touch-sensitive controls make it a pain to use.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Good sound quality
- ✓ Great battery life
- ✗ Awful touch-sensitive controls

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 2GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE YP-Z5QB
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.samsung.co.uk
HEADPHONES ★★★★★

SAMSUNG YP-K5 1GB

★★★★★

£80 inc VAT



The YP-K5 costs the same as Samsung's other player in this test, but the two are very different. The K5 has only 1GB of memory, but it's the only player here with a pair of built-in speakers. These are neatly concealed within the bottom half of the player until you slide it open to reveal them. Sound from the speakers is quiet and has little bass, but it's fairly well balanced.

The K5's headphones are some of the strangest we've seen. Each side has a driver that's oriented away from the ear, with sound channelled into the ear via a spout-like piece of rubber. This odd arrangement allows for a large, bassy driver, but the headphones don't sound particularly good. They're big, and look like a pair of miniature hairdryers, but at least they're comfortable.

Fortunately, the K5 doesn't share the Z5's awful controls. It uses a fully touch-sensitive system, but its illuminated controls are far more predictable. Each page of the K5's menu melts calmly into the next. It's simple to navigate, but doesn't offer as many options as lots of other players. There are very few EQ settings, no custom option and an absurd Concert Hall effect that applies a gimmicky reverberation.

VERDICT

Though both the K5 and its headphones are big, the player itself looks stylish and is easy to use. It has a long battery life and is faster than average to fill with music. Its speakers could prove useful, but they could also be an irritation in the hands of a busload of teenagers.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Attractive, logical menus
- ✓ Good battery life, handy speakers
- ✗ Muddy-sounding headphones

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE YP-K5JZB
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.samsung.co.uk
HEADPHONES ★★★★★

MPIO FL400 1GB

★★★

£89 inc VAT

MPIO's FL400 is the second most expensive 1GB player in this test. It's small and can be worn around the neck, but Apple's iPod Shuffle is smaller and lighter still.

The MPIO's headphones are integrated into a neck strap, which locks to the player with a plastic clip. This is tied to the headphones, but MPIO supplies a spare in case you break it. However, the headphones use an unusual 2.5mm audio jack so they'll be hard to replace. They don't sound especially good, either. Some upper mid-range frequencies are a little harsh, but we were able to get decent sound using the custom equaliser.

Like most small MP3 players, the MPIO has very small buttons that some users may find tricky to use. Its small screen hasn't room to display a full list of menu options, but it isn't too much of a challenge once you've familiarised yourself with the menus.

We weren't able to plug our recording equipment into the FL400, so we had to use a microphone to measure the length of time it played for on a single charge. This forced us to use a slightly higher than normal volume level, which may have had a small impact on the player's battery life, but even so it produced a disappointing result.

VERDICT

The FL400 is fairly smart and well designed, but it's expensive for a 1GB player. Sony's NW-S703F is superior, costs only £3 more and has more than five times the battery life.



SUMMARY

- ✓ Smart, easy to use
- ✗ Poor battery life, expensive
- ✗ Unusual headphone socket

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
SUPPLIER www.amp3.co.uk
DETAILS www.mpio.com
HEADPHONES ★★★★★

SONY NW-S703F

★★★★★

£92 inc VAT

We've reviewed several noise-cancelling headphones, but the NW-S703F is the first MP3 player we've seen to come with its own. A small microphone near the driver in each headphone picks up environmental noises. These are amplified, reversed and fed back into the speaker, mostly cancelling out the original noise.

The noise-cancelling electronics are housed in the MP3 player itself, so there's no ugly, bulky battery housings that blight standalone headphones of this type. The player and headphones have a proprietary connection, and the player also works with normal headphones with a 3.5mm jack plug.

The headphones sound great. With noise cancelling switched on, regular background racket is greatly reduced. You can adjust the microphone level on the player to increase or reduce noise reduction.

The NW-S703F's battery lasted longer than any other rechargeable device in our continuous playback test, although we had to run this test with standard Sennheiser headphones rather than the noise-cancelling set. Its menu system is unusual, and the rotating controller is not particularly intuitive, but you get used to it.

VERDICT

The NW-S703F is expensive for a 1GB player and, like other Sony players, you can only buy protected music from the Sony Connect online store. If you're happy with this, and happy to use SonicStage software to transfer music, it's an excellent MP3 player.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent sound quality
- ✓ Very long battery life
- ✗ Expensive for a 1GB player

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE NWS703FB.CE7
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.sony.co.uk
HEADPHONES ★★★★★



ARCHOS 104

★★★★

£104 inc VAT

Archos' 104 is the only player in this test that stores data on a 1" hard disk, rather than a 1.8" disk or flash memory. It's more than twice as thick as the iPod Nano and weighs twice as much, but it doesn't feel much bigger than other compact players such as the SanDisk Sansa e270.

The 104's operating system feels very different to the other players here but, for the most part, it's extremely well thought out. The player uses MTP, so you can manage its contents using Windows Media Player or Explorer. After you've transferred music, you can browse using ID3 tag information such as artist or album, or via the folders on the disk.

Uniquely in this test, the 104 displays detailed information on the track currently playing and lists the next track in the playlist or album. It's useful information, but it takes the player around eight seconds to prepare and display it after starting each song. It won't respond to any commands during this time, so skipping more than one track can be tedious.

The 104's headphones have an integrated volume control and sound fairly clear, but they're lacking in bass. Sound quality was excellent through our other headphones, but we noticed clicks when adjusting the volume.

VERDICT

Despite some irritations, the 104 is easy to use. It's much cheaper than a 4GB iPod Nano, but the 4GB SanDisk Sansa e260 costs only a little more and has a much better screen and battery life.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Intuitive control system
- ✓ Clear sound
- ✗ Slow button response

HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 4GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE 500852
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.archos.com
HEADPHONES ★★★★★



SANDISK Sansa e270

★★★★★

£117 inc VAT



We reviewed SanDisk's 4GB Sansa e260 in *What's New, Shopper* September 2006. The e270 is identical, but has 6GB of flash memory.

Only four players in this test have a lower cost per megabyte. Should you run low on space, you can use the player's MicroSD slot to add more; 1GB cards cost around £25 including VAT.

The black e270 looks much like an old iPod Nano. Instead of a touch-sensitive scroll wheel, however, it has a rotating controller raised above the level of the surrounding menu buttons. The two are close together, so it can be hard to press the buttons. They don't make a definite click when activated, making the e270 a little fiddly to use at times.

Fortunately, it's very easy to get music, photos and videos on to the player. It can be set to behave either as an MTP device, to work with Windows Media Player, or as removable storage. To get video files on the player you simply drag and drop them on to the supplied Media Converter application, which recodes and copies them across. It's very easy to use and supports a wide range of source video types, although recoded videos don't sound as good as the original files.

VERDICT

The e270's control system isn't perfect, but it's a high-quality player with plenty of storage for the price. It sounds good, plays video and comes with decent headphones.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Attractive design, good sound
- ✓ Lots of space for this price
- ✗ The Nano's controls are better

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 6GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE SDMX4-6144
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.sandisk.co.uk
HEADPHONES ★★★★★



APPLE iPod Nano 4GB

★★★★

£120 inc VAT

The new iPod Nano looks like an old iPod Mini after a crash diet. Its case is formed from one piece of metal alloy, which frames the screen, scroll wheel and connectors. The robust design is different to the full-size iPod, and is arguably less attractive, at least in green. Other colours are available, but it looks best in black or silver.

There are some more subtle changes to the new Nano. Apple says that its screen is brighter, and that its battery will last for 24 hours. In fact, in our test it ran for almost 28. The player's music menu now has a search option that finds artists, albums and tracks matching the letter or word you enter. We found that the Nano's control wheel was more responsive than those on older iPods.

Though the new Nano has many improvements, we're disappointed that some of the old player's weaknesses remain. There are new, more rounded headphones, but these sound no better than the old type. There's still no custom equaliser setting, and it still distorts even at low volumes when you apply a preset that boosts bass levels. Though Apple says that the Nano has skip-free playback, it wouldn't play cross-mixed tracks from a compilation album seamlessly.

VERDICT

The iPod Nano is attractive, easy to use and has a huge battery life. Though it is good value, its sound quality is disappointing for such an otherwise well-designed player.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Great design, easy to use
- ✓ Impressive battery life
- ✗ Sound can be distorted

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 4GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE MA487ZT/A
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.apple.com
HEADPHONES ★★★★★



CREATIVE Zen V Plus 4GB

★★★

£125 inc VAT

Creative's Zen V Plus looks identical to the Zen V, reviewed in *What's New, Shopper* October 2006, but it has an FM radio and can play back video files. Zen V Plus models cost slightly more than the equivalent capacity Zen V.

The Zen V Plus is identified by Windows as an MTP player, so it's easy to transfer music using Explorer or Windows Media Player 10. To transfer video, you'll need to install Creative's Media Source software and use the included Video Converter. You can drag and drop video files into the software, which will recode the originals before copying them across.

This player's screen is small and has a comparatively low resolution, so it isn't the best way to view photos or video files. Videos sounded better than those on SanDisk's e270, but they looked better on SanDisk's player.

Creative's headphones have deeper drivers than most, and can feel uncomfortable. They don't sound great, with a muffled top end and bass that lacks detail. We're not keen on the player's controls, either, as its joystick is too small for comfort.

At just under 12½ hours, the Zen V Plus' battery life is acceptable, but many of the competing devices are much better.

VERDICT

It's small and looks quite cute, but the Zen V Plus doesn't have the sound quality, ease of use or battery life to stand out from other similarly priced players.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Looks OK
- ✗ Unimpressive battery life
- ✗ Uncomfortable headphones

FLASH MEMORY MP3 PLAYER 4GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE 70PF2072001Y5
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS <http://uk.europe.creative.com>
HEADPHONES ★★★★★



LG MFJM53

★★

£150 inc VAT

LG's MFJM53 uses flash memory for storage, and is the only 8GB device in this test. It's a little big for a flash-memory player, but it looks reasonably stylish and well designed.

The MFJM53's control system is the most confusing of all the players in this test. Pressing the Menu button brings up a list of the player's main functions, including Music. Selecting this option returns you to the 'now playing' screen, so it's not immediately obvious how to select the track or album you want to hear.

Holding down the Menu button gives you the option of browsing your track library, but songs within an album aren't displayed or played in the correct order. Oddly, a second 'EZ' menu button displays similar options and information, but the options work far more predictably. The MFJM53 takes a while to start playing the tracks you select, and the long pauses it inserts between tracks will ruin continuously mixed compilation albums.

The MFJM53's headphones sound OK, but they aren't especially comfortable. Its battery life is excellent, however, and transferring music to the player is quick when it's running as an external storage device. You can set it into MTP mode, but only if you can find the menu option.

VERDICT

Though it offers lots of storage space for the money and has a good battery, this player requires far too much effort to use. The SanDisk Sansa e270 is far better, and the 8GB e280 version is £15 cheaper.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Lots of storage, great battery
- ✗ Horribly confusing menus
- ✗ Uncomfortable headphones

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 8GB capacity,
USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE MFJM53
SUPPLIER www.currys.co.uk
DETAILS www.lge.co.uk
HEADPHONES ★★



PACKARD BELL Vibe 500

★

£159 inc VAT

Packard Bell's Vibe 500 is the more affordable of the two 30GB MP3 players in this test. Though it's priced quite competitively, it doesn't feel like a £160 player and its design looks a little bland and outdated.

The Vibe has dedicated power and hold buttons at the side, and four touch-sensitive buttons on the front. There's a short touch-sensitive scroll strip in the middle, but we found that this was imprecise. Though it's reasonably easy to understand the player's menus, their layout isn't good. Tapping the menu button during playback brings up a quick menu that lets you change the equaliser mode, but you can't modify the custom equaliser settings without navigating back to the top-level menu.

Packard Bell supplies the Vibe 500 with sports-style headphones that include a soft plastic ear loop. This holds them in place, but the player's hard disk means it isn't the best choice for active users. You'll want to replace the headphones anyway, as they're by far the worst here. Even with a decent pair of headphones, the Vibe 500 doesn't sound very good. As with the 80GB iPod and iPod nano, the music distorts if you enhance the bass level using the equaliser.

VERDICT

Transferring music to the Vibe 500 is very quick and its battery life is just acceptable, but there's no other reason to recommend it. It costs only £16 less than the Zen Vision M, and although Creative's player isn't perfect it's far superior to the Vibe.

SUMMARY

- ✗ Sound distortion
- ✗ Fiddly scroll bar
- ✗ Awful headphones

HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 30GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE VIBE500
SUPPLIER www.amp3.co.uk
DETAILS www.packardbell.co.uk
HEADPHONES ★



CREATIVE Zen Vision: M

★★★★

£175 inc VAT

We first reviewed Creative's Zen Vision: M in *What's New, Shopper* April 2006, when it cost £235. That was £30 more than the equivalent iPod, but the price has since fallen by £60 and it now costs the same as the 30GB iPod.

The screen is the same size and resolution as that of the latest iPod. It's big and detailed enough to do justice to photos, and allows you to watch videos comfortably. When it comes to different video formats and codecs, this player is the least fussy we've tested. It has native support for many video types, including DivX, and comes with software that can recode other files into a suitable format.

It's not all good, however. Its front panel controls comprise four clickable buttons and a touch-sensitive scroll bar that also acts as a left/right rocker. The clicking buttons work fine, although their layout and functions are unusual, but we found that the scroll bar was unpredictable. Choosing music from a long list is made easier by the player's index letter list, which appears automatically.

Creative's headphones sound muddy, and feel thick in the ear. The player itself sounds fine, but bassy EQ settings introduce a little distortion.

VERDICT

The Zen Vision: M's great screen and video support make it a good choice if you want to do more than listen to music, but it doesn't have the style, battery life or ease of use of an iPod.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent screen
- ✓ Wide video format support
- ✗ Bulky, clumsy controls

HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 30GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE 70PF169000070
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS <http://uk.europe.creative.com>
HEADPHONES ★★



APPLE iPod 80GB

★★★★★

£223 inc VAT

Apple recently introduced this new 80GB iPod to replace the previous 60GB player. Though it appears very similar to the outgoing model, there are subtle improvements to the player's menu system and battery life.

Though the iPod is the smallest and most stylish of the three players here with a 1.8" hard disk, it's still much bigger than most of the flash-memory players. The 80GB disk has two platters as opposed to the single-platter 30GB model, so it is thicker.

Like Creative's Zen Vision: M, the iPod has a large, high-resolution screen that's good for viewing photos. This and the lower-capacity 30GB version are the only iPods that will play back videos, but they don't support as many formats as Creative's player. You can buy video only via iTunes, and to import it you'll need to buy a copy of Quicktime Pro.

As with the iPod nano, the player has a volume lock that you can set and protect with a combination if necessary. The redesigned headphones don't sound particularly clear and there's no custom equalisation option. The player is still prone to distorting when you use a bass-heavy preset.

VERDICT

The iPod looks great, has plenty of storage space and a good battery and is a joy to use. It's good value, too, but at this price it should include better headphones and it shouldn't distort at low volume levels.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Huge capacity, lovely design
- ✓ Great battery life
- ✗ Sound can be distorted

HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER 80GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE MA448ZT/A
SUPPLIER www.savastore.com
DETAILS www.apple.com
HEADPHONES ★★



MP3 PLAYERS

BUDGET BUY								
MANUFACTURER	SWEEX	APPLE	NETAC	IRIVER	SAMSUNG	SAMSUNG	MPIO	SONY
Model	Pretty Pink 1GB	iPod Shuffle	Mustik A200 1GB	T10 1GB	YP-Z5 2GB	YP-K5 1GB	FL400 1GB	NW-S703F
Rating	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★
Headphones rating	★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★★
HARDWARE								
Capacity (formatted)	1GB (951MB)	1GB (963MB)	1GB (940MB)	1GB (996MB)	2GB (1.90GB)	1GB (987MB)	1GB (994MB)	1GB (968MB)
Interface	USB	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed
Storage medium	Flash memory	Flash memory	Flash memory	Flash memory	Flash memory	Flash memory	Flash memory	Flash memory
Battery type and charging options	AAA battery	Li-on, USB	Li-ion, USB, in-car charger	AA battery	Li-poly, USB	Li-poly, USB	Li-poly, USB	Li-ion, USB
Dimensions (WxDxH), weight	95x23x31mm, 34g	42x11x28mm, 15.5g	70x14.5x41.5mm, 44g	86x29.5x41mm, 49g	42.5x12x90mm, 58g	98x19x48mm, 106g	46x13x28mm, 25.5g	28x17x88mm, 48g
FEATURES								
Display	Mono LCD screen	None	4.5cm colour screen	Colour screen	160x128 pixel, 4.6cm colour screen	160x128 pixel, 4.3cm colour screen	Mono LCD screen	Colour screen
Expansion slot	None	None	None	None	None	None	None	None
FM radio	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Record options	Microphone	None	Microphone, radio	Microphone	None	None	Microphone, radio	None
Supplied with	Headphones, USB cable, AAA battery	Headphones, dock	Headphones, USB cable, in-car charger	Headphones, AA battery, USB cable, neck strap	Headphones, USB cable	Headphones, USB cable	Neck strap headphones (mini connector), USB cable, spare cable clip	Noise-cancelling headphones (proprietary connector), USB cable, neck strap
TEST RESULTS								
Battery life	7h 28m	16h 47m	6h 25m	31h 51m	26h 12m	22h 46m	5h 49m	31h 42m
500MB transfer speed	14m 25s	2m 51s	17m 22s	4m 22s	2m 28s	2m 39s	5m 13s	5m 51s
Supported audio formats	MP3, WMA, WAV	MP3, AAC, Protected AAC, WAV, AIFF, Audible, Apple lossless	MP3, WMA, WAV	MP3, WMA, OGG	MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM	MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM	MP3, WMA, ASF, OGG	MP3, WMA, ATRAC3, ATRAC3 PLUS
Supported image formats	None	None	JPEG, BMP	None	JPEG	JPEG	None	None
Supported video formats	None	None	None	None	None	None	None	None
Download compatibilities	None	iTunes	None	Plays For Sure subscription and download	Plays For Sure subscription and download	Plays For Sure subscription and download	Plays For Sure download	Sony Connect
BUYING INFORMATION								
Price (per megabyte)	£22 (2.1p)	£55 (5.4p)	£70 (6.8p)	£70 (6.8p)	£80 (3.9p)	£80 (7.8p)	£89 (8.7p)	£92 (9.0p)
Warranty duration and terms	Three years RTB	One year RTB	One year RTB	Two years RTB	One year RTB	One year RTB	Two years RTB replacement	One year RTB
Supplier	www.misco.co.uk	www.dabs.com	www.weast.co.uk	www.amp3.co.uk	www.amazon.co.uk	www.amazon.co.uk	www.amp3.co.uk	www.dabs.co.uk
Details	www.sweex.com	www.apple.com/uk	www.netac.com	www.iriver.com	www.samsung.co.uk	www.samsung.co.uk	www.mpio.com	www.sony.co.uk
Part code	MP024	MA564ZT/A	6926337Z05106	3T107A-EUOYX1	YP-Z5QB	YP-K5J2B	None	NWS703FB.CE7

BEST BUY								
MANUFACTURER	ARCHOS	SANDISK	APPLE	CREATIVE	LG	PACKARD BELL	CREATIVE	APPLE
Model	104	Sansa e270	iPod Nano 4GB	Zen V Plus 4GB	MFJM53	Vibe 500	Zen Vision: M 30GB	iPod 80GB
Rating	★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★	★★	★	★★★	★★★★
Headphones rating	★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★	★★★	★	★★	★★★
HARDWARE								
Capacity (formatted)	4GB (3.73GB)	6GB (5.58GB)	4GB (3.66GB)	4GB (3.8GB)	8GB (7.43GB)	30GB (27.9GB)	30GB (27.8GB)	80GB (74.3GB)
Interface	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed
Storage medium	1" hard disk	Flash memory	Flash memory	Flash memory	Flash memory	1.8" hard disk	1.8" hard disk	1.8" hard disk
Battery type and charging options	Li-ion, USB or optional charger	Li-ion, USB	Li-ion, USB or optional charger	Li-ion, USB	Li-poly, USB or supplied charger	Li-ion, USB or supplied charger	Li-ion, USB or optional charger	Li-ion, USB or optional charger
Dimensions (WxDxH), weight	91x14x43mm, 80g	89x13x44mm, 75g	40x7x90mm, 40g	44x16x68mm, 43.5g	48x14x101mm, 88g	101x22x60mm, 150g	104x19x62mm, 163g	62x14x104mm, 157g
FEATURES								
Display	3.8cm colour screen	4.5cm colour screen	176x132 pixel, 3.8cm colour screen	128x128 pixel, 3.8cm colour screen	160x128 pixel, 4.3cm colour screen	160x128 pixel, 4.5cm colour screen	320x240 pixel, 6.3cm colour screen	320x240 pixel, 6.3cm colour screen
Expansion slot	None	MicroSD	None	None	None	None	None	None
FM Radio	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Record options	None	Microphone	None	Microphone, line in	Microphone, radio, line in	Microphone, line in	Microphone, radio	None
Supplied with	Headphones, USB cable, neck strap	Headphones, USB cable, soft pouch, lanyard	Headphones, USB cable, universal dock adaptor	Headphones, USB cable, line in cable, soft pouch, neck strap	Headphones, USB cable, charger	Headphones, USB cable, USB host cable, soft pouch, 3.5mm audio cable, charger	Headphones, USB cable, sync adaptor, soft pouch	Headphones, USB cable, soft pouch, universal dock adaptor
TEST RESULTS								
Battery life	12h 21m	17h 32m	27h 50m	12h 13m	23h 13m	8h 00m	14h 13m	21h 33m
500MB transfer speed	4m 57s	3m 33s	1m 57s	4m 11s	2m 48s	31s	1m 15s	1m 15s
Supported audio formats	MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM, WAV	MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM	MP3, AAC, Protected AAC, WAV, AIFF, Audible, Apple lossless	MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM, WAV	MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM, ASF, OGG, WAV	MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM, WAV	MP3, WMA, WMA-DRM, WAV	MP3, AAC, Protected AAC, WAV, AIFF, Audible, Apple lossless
Supported image formats	JPEG	JPEG, BMP	JPEG, BMP, GIF, TIFF, PSD and PNG	JPEG	JPEG	JPEG, BMP	JPEG	JPEG, BMP, GIF, TIFF, PSD and PNG
Supported video formats	None	Proprietary (recording software supplied)	None	Proprietary (recording software supplied)	MPEG4, 15fps, 160x128 pixels	MOV, AVI, Motion-JPEG	DivX 4 and 5, XviD 5, MPEG-1, MPEG-2, MPEG4-SP, WMV9, Motion-JPEG	H.264 and MPEG4 video in M4V, MP4 and MOV file formats
Download compatibilities	Plays For Sure subscription and download	Plays For Sure subscription and download	iTunes	Plays For Sure subscription and download	Plays For Sure subscription and download	Windows Media Player versions 9 and 10	Plays For Sure subscription and download, video download, rental and subscription	iTunes
BUYING INFORMATION								
Price (per megabyte)	£104 (2.5p)	£117 (1.9p)	£120 (2.9p)	£125 (3.1p)	£150 (1.8p)	£159 (0.52p)	£175 (0.57p)	£223 (0.27p)
Warranty duration and terms	One year RTB	One year RTB	One year RTB	One year RTB	One year RTB	One year RTB	One year RTB	One year RTB
Supplier	www.amazon.co.uk	www.dabs.com	www.amazon.co.uk	www.amazon.co.uk	www.currys.co.uk	www.amp3.co.uk	www.dabs.com	www.savastore.com
Details	www.archos.com	www.sandisk.co.uk	www.apple.com/uk	http://uk.europe.creative.com	www.lge.co.uk	www.packardbell.co.uk	http://uk.europe.creative.com	www.apple.com/uk
Part code	500852	SDMX4-6144	MA487ZT/A	70PF2072001Y5	MFJM53	VIBE500	70PF169000070	MA448ZT/A

Labs verdict MP3 players

We were pleasantly surprised by the high standard of most of the MP3 players in this test. Nearly all of them play high-quality music through a good pair of headphones, and some have batteries that run for days.

If you don't have the budget for a high-capacity player, Apple's new iPod Shuffle is a great choice. It sounds good, looks smart and has an impressive battery. It's our Budget Buy.

The Shuffle is fine for people with a small music collection, but Apple's 80GB iPod is ideal for music obsessives. Its design and battery life are impressive, and its click wheel controller remains the best interface we've used. Like older models, though, it distorts sound when using some equaliser presets.

If you don't need to store hundreds of albums, we recommend SanDisk's Sansa



SANDISK
Sansa e270
★★★★★



APPLE
iPod Shuffle
★★★★★



e270. Its controls are clunky, but it holds 6GB of music, looks smart, sounds great and has a good battery. It's our Best Buy.